

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – February 6, 2022
Luke 5:1-11 – “Fishers of Men”
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel describes events early in Jesus' ministry. “Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret.” This body of water is also known as the Sea of Galilee, an important place we hear about frequently in the gospel records. It is a lake – not a sea – about 8 miles wide and 14 miles long.

Simon (Peter, as he will be named) and the brothers James and John are partners in a small fishing corporation, owners of two boats. Jesus got into one of the boats and asked Peter to put out a little away from shore. He then used the boat as his pulpit, sitting, as was the custom of rabbis at the time, to teach the people on shore. Though Luke doesn't record what Jesus taught, we may assume that he was carrying out his mission of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

Peter was a professional fisherman. Jesus was not. The two men had a conversation about fishing. I think we can imagine ourselves in Peter's position. We have probably been in the same kind of situation ourselves. We have an area of expertise. We have spent time, energy, and attention to learn what we know. We've had years of experience. We know what we're doing. Though we may be open to ongoing learning, that doesn't mean that we want to be told how to do our jobs by someone who isn't a professional or experienced. Our reaction to someone who knows less than we do but tells us how to do our jobs may very well be resistance. Don't tell me how to do my job! What do you know about it anyway? Often not a helpful attitude, but understandable and common.

Peter and his partners have been fishing all night. They have tried everything they know to get a catch of fish. Nothing. They are tired, frustrated, and disappointed. No catch means no income. A night wasted. Then Jesus tells them to do again what they have been doing all night. Luke doesn't tell us what Peter was feeling, but his reply to Jesus suggests that he didn't think much of Jesus' direction. “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” Perhaps Peter would have told another man to keep his suggestions to himself. But since it was Jesus, someone who clearly spoke with authority...

And when Peter did what Jesus told him to do, nothing less than a miracle occurred. There were no fish, and then there were more fish than the nets could hold. So many fish that Peter's boat and the boat belonging to his partners started to sink under the weight! The contrast was so great that they couldn't miss the significance. This was no chance event. This was a sign showing Peter and the others who Jesus was. Peter was in the presence of the holy. He addressed Jesus with the name of God. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Like Isaiah in his vision of the Lord – “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” In the presence of God, Peter and Isaiah acknowledge the truth about all of us – our imperfection compared with the perfection of God. Peter fell down at Jesus' knees. What else could be right for a sinful human being to do in the presence of the sinless One, in the presence of the Lord?

Having revealed himself to these three fishermen by a miracle and having established his authority to direct them, Jesus gives the men a new vocation. “From now on you will be

catching people.” Jesus called Simon Peter, James, and John to be his first disciples. Just as Isaiah responded to the voice of the Lord – “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” – “Here am I; send me!” In the same way, these fishermen responded to Jesus’ call. They brought their boats full of fish to shore, and instead of taking the fish to market to sell, they left their catch, their nets, and their boats to follow Jesus.

This lesson reminds us that following Jesus can be costly. Following Jesus can mean leaving behind or giving up what is precious to us. It takes faith and trust. Stepping out into an unknown future. Just listening to Jesus’ direction and letting him lead.

What else can the lesson teach us in the church today? The story suggests that there are two different paths to getting amazing results – doing the same thing over and over again and doing something entirely new. Let’s think about that. How might this be relevant to us in the church today?

Jesus asked the fishermen to do again what they had done all night – put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch. This time, at Jesus’ direction, a different and amazing result! A miracle catch of fish, a revelation of who Jesus is. Then, after the fish are hauled in, Jesus asks the fishermen to do what they had never done before, never even thought of – “catch people.” This passage from Luke doesn’t tell us, but we know from the rest of Luke’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles that there were amazing results from this new vocation. We are part of those amazing results. We are among the countless people who have followed Jesus through the line of the first apostles and their teaching and witness to the Lord.

In the Episcopal Church we value tradition. In worship we obviously value repetition. A 3-year cycle of Bible readings, a church calendar of seasons and feast days, familiar hymns, the psalms that have been prayed for thousands of years, the Lord’s Prayer, the Holy Eucharist in a few forms, but always with what are known as the words of institution: “This is my body... This is my blood ... Do this in remembrance of me.” We do the same thing over and over again. After all, we have promised in our baptismal vows to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” So, we keep faith by gathering in Jesus’ name week after week. Sometimes it feels like there’s no “catch,” nothing. Then, sometimes, a miracle! The voice of God heard. The hand of God seen. The love of God felt. A heart opened, a new understanding, a life changed. The Lord!

Jesus also calls us to what is new. Stop fishing for fish and fish for people, he told those men by the Sea of Galilee. Those of us who have been in the church for a long time know how much has changed, how often we have been challenged to do things differently. Our Bishop reminds us that during these challenging times the church needs to adapt to better meet the needs of people in the world as it is now. We don’t know exactly what that will mean for us.

Today’s lesson from Luke’s Gospel shows us that there is no easy formula for how to face the future. Sometimes we may be called to do what we have always done. Sometimes we may be called to do something new, even radically new. The constant now and in the future is to listen for Jesus’ direction – in prayer, in scripture, in one another, and in the world. We are called to have open minds and open hearts. We are called to have a living faith, an abiding trust in God. We are called to follow Jesus our Lord, come what may. Amen.